

# Defining Ibadah

by

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## Introduction

Below is a readaptation of a series of Facebook posts I made on “Ibadah and Shirk” back in October 2016. The purpose of the series was to summarize several key ideas that were elucidated in Dr. Sultan al-Umayri’s (professor of aqeedah at Umm al-Qurra University) book [\*Tahqīq Al-Ifādah Bi-Tahrīr Mafhūm Al-‘Ibādah\*](#).

Some take the opinion that unless one believes that the object of his veneration and praise is an object that has divine attributes coupled with self-sufficiency (*istiqlal*), then those acts of glorification do not constitute worship. Dr. Umayri’s book was authored for the primary purpose of debunking this false stance that appeared several centuries late in Islamic history.

Those who could read the book are strongly encouraged to do so, as this English summary was written informally for a limited facebook audience and does not include the majority of the proofs and several of the other key citations found in the book. Nevertheless, my summary touches upon several points discussed in the book, and I have arranged them in the following sections:

- 1) Violations in Rububiyah**
- 2) The Confusion in Defining Ibadah and Ilah: Conflating Between Accuracy and Definition**
- 3) The Classical Linguistic Definition of Ibadah**
- 4) Unconditional and Conditional Acts of Ibadah**
- 5) Objections Raised Against the Linguistic Definition of Ibadah, Part 1**
- 6) Objections Raised Against the Linguistic Definition of Ibadah, Part 2**
- 7) Determining the *Manats* (Reasons or Factors) of Shirk in a Given Scenario**
- 8) Addressing the Argument: The Quraysh Believed that Allah Has Partners**
- 9) Addressing the Argument: The Quraysh Believed that their Idols Could Compel Allah to Accept their Intercession**
- 10) Addressing the Argument: The Quraysh Believed that their Idols Could Benefit and Harm**

**11) Addressing the Argument: The Qur'an Implicitly States that the Quraysh Believed their Gods Had Powers Independent of Allah**

**12) Addressing the Argument: Prophet Isa ('alayhi assalam) and His Ability to Resurrect the Dead**

**13) The Christians and Jews were accused of Shirk in the Qur'an (9:31) for believing that their priests and rabbis had permission from God to legislate what is halal and forbidden on earth**

### **1) Violations in Rububiyah**

Many brothers have committed a category error and mistakenly conflated between two things:

1) اعتقاد الربوبية في المخلوق – ascribing an attribute of Rububiyah (e.g. Omnipotence, divine essence, etc.) to a false deity, hence resulting in Shirk in Rububiyah.

2) الانحراف في الربوبية – having a distorted view in Rububiyah

The first category is a more specific kind of violation in Rububiyah, which would entail assigning attributes only worthy of Allah to creatures. For example, somebody claims that his idol is All-Powerful or All-Knowing or is a co-creator alongside Allah, etc.

The second category is more broad and general than, yet inclusive of the first one. For example, one may have a distorted view in Rububiyah by having a diminished view of Allah's Mercy (e.g. believing that it's "necessary" to have intercessors) or greatness of Allah (e.g. believing that Allah is too weak to have complete power over all of creation) or have a negative and distorted view of His Perfection (e.g. one may believe that Allah is not a perfect creator or sustainer of the universe and is doing a poor job at it, etc.). Such beliefs do not necessarily constitute Shirk in Rububiyah, but rather a kufri distorted view regarding it.

Another beneficial distinction to make between the two is that the first category of Rububiyah violation entails uplifting a creation to the status of Allah, while the second category of Rububiyah violation, in addition to the first category, also includes views that diminish Allah to the status of creation.

A good example of a violation of the second without the first is believing that Allah would not accept invocations and prayers directly, except only via intermediaries such as saints. They would liken Allah to some kings and other high-ranking people who would not accept "speaking directly to anyone", and hence feel the need to have others intercede on their behalf. As a result, they have diminished the capacity of Allah's Mercy and committed a violation of Rububiyah, despite not necessarily attributing any divine attributes to those whom they rely on interceding on their behalf.

Or they may have a diminished view of Allah's Knowledge and believe that since Allah does not know what is happening here on earth, that He is not able to hear the invocations of His

servants, and as a result, they resort to relying on intercessors closer to Allah who could then relay their prayers to Him. This is also a distorted view in Rububiyah.

The mistake some people have made is that they believe that a distorted view in Rububiyah is only of the first kind. They believe that all kinds of violations of Rububiyah are Shirk in Rububiyah and some of them even go further in believing that all forms of Shirk in Rububiyah require attributing independence (istiqal) of Allah to their objects of worship.

Another mistake many others from the Salafi camp have made is when they would speak in general terms such as “Tawhid ar-Rububiyah” and believe that the only criterion which sufficiently meets this is that one merely believes that Allah is the sole Creator and Sustainer of the universe. Rather, this is not the case. To have a true and complete Tawhid in ar-Rububiyah, that Tawhid must be free of all kinds of distorted views of it, whether it may belong to the specific first category or generic second category.

Another problem I have noticed is that people do not tend to agree with each other regarding what “Rububiyah” encompasses and have thus fallen into never-ending debates purely due to semantics. In light of that, I will not be spending time dwelling on the definition of this term; rather, it’s the concepts and notions which should mainly concern us.

## **2) The Confusion in Defining Ibadah and Ilah: Conflating Between Accuracy and Definition**

Some brothers have fallen into the error of conflating between two issues:

1) What is the correct *definition* of Ilah (god) and Ibadah?

and

2) What is the correct *understanding* of Ilah and Ibadah?

The confusion that has occurred is that there are brothers who look at a dictionary on Ilah, which describes an Ilah with the accurate meaning suited for the word by mentioning all the necessary features and attributes of an Ilah, and then based on that, erroneously claim that according to the dictionary an object or person cannot be labelled an “Ilah” - regardless of whether that entity is truly an Ilah or not - unless that “Ilah” is believed to have those essential features and characteristics by the one worshiping that “Ilah”.

So since the true Ilah (i.e. correct understanding of Ilah) must be The Creator, Sustainer, etc., they leaped, by strictly by looking at the dictionary, to saying that unless someone believes the object of his Ibadah has these features, then that means that we cannot call that object the one is venerating a false Ilah.

And they (consistently) proceeded on to make an even further leap and said that “Ibadah” cannot be actualized unless that person conducting that action believes the object of his veneration is an Ilah which has those necessary features.

This is a huge error, for it fails to take into account that belief in “false gods” does not only entail having the wrong identity of the Ilah (i.e. directing my ibadah to someone who truly isn’t the Ilah), but rather, also having the wrong description and understanding of the Ilah. Someone may very well intend to take an object or person as an Ilah, yet not attribute to it all of the essential features and attributes that the true Ilah should have. That doesn’t mean that we come and say “No! He doesn’t believe this person is an Ilah”! No, rather, we do say that he is taking this object as an Ilah as long as his actions to that Ilah meet the conditions of Ibadah (to be discussed in subsequent posts). However, this Ilah is a false Ilah due to identity and characteristics (i.e. it’s not Allah, the Supreme God identified via the religion of Islam).

Same thing goes for Ibadah. If the person is intending to worship this false Ilah, then we call this act of his “Ibadah”. Is it a correct form of Ibadah? No. Is the Ibadah being directed to the true Ilah? No. But that doesn’t change the fact that his actions constitute Ibadah, and this is independent of what he believes about the object of his worship.

In other words, if the dictionary tells you that an Ilah is: He who creates and sustains, and then you have someone who believes in a "thunder god" and this "thunder god" doesn't concern himself with sustaining the universe, that doesn't mean that you cannot call this "thunder god" a false ilah! Of course it's a false ilah! Why? Precisely because those worshiping that false Ilah are treating it as such.

So once again, we must avoid this conflation and be careful of how we infer and derive ideas.

In the next posts inshallah, we will discuss the classical definition of Ibadah agreed upon by the majority of religious scholars and linguists, some objections raised against it, and the categories of Ibadah.

### **3) The Classical Linguistic Definition of Ibadah**

If one reads what the majority of the classical linguists and theologians have said when defining Ibadah, you could pretty much summarize it as follows:

"It is that intentional state which combines feelings of utmost humility and submission with an ultimate feeling of love which stirs the individual to cling unto his object of Ibadah, submit to its will, stay in continuous connection with it, and perform actions to please it."

To break this down in interpretation further...

- “State”: indicates that the Ibadah is that consistently stable and permanent part of the person in question. It’s a feeling that exists within him which influences his action and speech. It’s not a transient thought or anything like that.

- “Intentional”: entails that the person is willing to be in the state he is in and loves being in that state.

- “Combines feelings of utmost humility and submission with an ultimate feeling of love”: This isn’t a mere form of submission, but rather submission accompanied with love and willingness,

for one may be coerced to submit or may willingly submit whilst hating the object/person he is submitting to. For example, if someone prostrates in full submission and humiliation to a king to spare his family from death, that doesn't constitute Ibadah since it was not accompanied by love and willingness. Or let's say someone loves somebody so much that when he heard that he died, he went mad and died shortly after. This is not Ibadah, since this intense love wasn't accompanied by submission and humility.

But let's say that someone begins to form a strong connection with a creature and begins to submit in utmost humility to it with love completely filling his heart toward it, which then eventually leads to him prostrating and offering sacrifices to this creature with the intention of getting close to it, seeking its pleasure and submitting to its will. This person has fallen into shirk, and this is regardless of whether the person ascribes divine attributes to that creature or not.

Regarding the terms "utmost" (غایة) and "ultimate" (نهاية), these are referring to degrees and levels that are uncharacteristic of what is prevalent in normal and ordinary circumstances. Humility, submission, and love in this scenario have religious connotations. It's important that one does not understand by these terms that the levels of submission and love are fully whole and complete with no possibility of any deficiency in them. No, this is not the case. Rather, they simply are referring to degrees and levels that are uncharacteristic of the normal and ordinary circumstances. This is how these terms are used in the Arabic language and especially by scholars in different disciplines (e.g. hadith, fiqh, etc.).

These feelings of love toward the object of Ibadah may arise due to different reasons such as being impressed with the perfection of that object, or due to being impressed with the blessings and generosity coming out of that object, or possibly due to believing that having a connection with this object would bring in benefits for himself, etc. There's no specific motive that must be present.

As a result, it's important to note that you will find some scholars who would argue that "ultimate feeling of love" is not an absolutely necessary condition of Ibadah, despite it being present in most cases. And that the fixed and absolute necessary pre-condition is "utmost submission and humility" only. This is because it's technically possible that one performs Ibadah to an object that he doesn't have "ultimate love" for and is doing it for purely selfish reasons only.

So in a nutshell, this is the classical linguistic definition of Ibadah. These scholars did not specify that "believing your object of veneration has divine attributes independent of Allah" is a pre-condition for the actualization of Ibadah.

It's also important to point out that just because this is the linguistic definition of Ibadah, that doesn't mean that our Shariah hasn't specified how we must go about our Ibadah. So just because I may prostrate to Allah with utmost submission, humility, and love, that doesn't change the fact that I have to follow the dictates of Islam whilst doing that (e.g. having ablution, facing the Qiblah, etc.)

Furthermore, just because in some contexts you may find some of the religious scholars and linguists explaining that Ibadah does imply attributing divine attributes to Allah, that is in the context of elaborating on the correct and necessary conditions of accepted Ibadah to Allah. It's

not that they are saying that Ibadah cannot occur unless one believes the object of his worship has divine attributes. Rather, they discussed three separate questions...

- 1) When does submission and humility constitute Ibadah?
- 2) What is the correct form of Ibadah?
- 3) Who is worthy of Ibadah?

And as warned in the previous post, we must be careful not to conflate between the issues.

In the next posts inshallah, we will look at the types of Ibadah and answer a couple of objections raised at the classical linguistic definition of Ibadah.

#### **4) Unconditional and Conditional Acts of Ibadah**

Several scholars have classified Ibadah into two different categories:

1) عبادة المحسنة or عبادة غير معقولة المعنى and this is the kind of Ibadah which is only known via revelation such as fasting the month of Ramadan, the offering of the five daily prayers with all its divinely ordained movements and conditions, etc.

These acts are *unconditionally* Ibadah if intentionally directed toward an object. Such acts are inherently in and of themselves acts which yield the utmost of submission and expression of love and humility to God. They are inherently in their essence acts of Ibadah because revelation says they are. In other words, the revelation has stated that they are acts of Ibadah, and your intention could do absolutely nothing to do change that.

2) عبادة محتملة or عبادة غير محسنة and these actions are *conditionally* Ibadah, and unless these actions fit under the criteria of Ibadah, they aren't acts of Ibadah.

Regarding the first category, if one intends to fast the month of Ramadan or perform the ritual of Hajj and directs those actions of Ibadah toward someone other than Allah, then this is major shirk by default. This is regardless of what he thinks of the person he's directing these actions toward. The only "intention" that matters here is the intention to perform and direct such actions toward someone other than Allah. Whether he ascribes attributes of Rububiyah to that someone or intends to perform these actions with the intention of Ibadah or not makes absolutely no difference whatsoever.

Regarding the second category, these are actions that are not inherently in and of themselves Ibadah. An example many scholars give is sujud. Sujud with the intention of "honoring" like how Prophet Yusuf's ('alayhi assalam) family did is not Ibadah. However, if someone is making sujud to an object and this sujud has the elements of Ibadah mentioned earlier in the previous post, then this kind of sujud clearly appears to take the form of Ibadah, as it's taking on the elements which constitute it.

In conclusion, there are actions that are inherently Ibadah in their essence, and there are actions, which only become Ibadah once they attain the elements that constitute Ibadah.

In the next sections, we will be looking at a couple of objections to the classical linguistic definition of Ibadah.

## 5) Objections Raised Against the Linguistic Definition of Ibadah, Part 1

There are some objections and concerns that some brothers have raised in regards to the classical linguistic definition of Ibadah.

- Objection no. 1: We are not ultimately interested in the linguistic definition of Ibadah, but rather the Shar'i definition of the word. Just as "Salah" has a linguistic definition, we are more concerned with the Shar'i definition of it. The Shariah has come and restricted the linguistic definition of Ibadah to entail that the object of Ibadah must be believed by its worshiper to have divine attributes.

- Objection no. 2: The terms "utmost" (غالية) and "ultimate" (نهاية) are vague in their scope and meaning. They are not very helpful in providing objective boundaries between what constitutes Ibadah acts and non-Ibadah acts. For example, when does sujud become Ibadah?

In this post inshallah, we will take a look at objection no.1.

Yes, it's true that with much of religious terminology (e.g. Salah, Zakah, etc.), we often find that there are linguistic definitions that elaborate on the original meaning of the word as known by the Arabs and religious definitions, which then convey the specific elements by which the word has come to be known within the framework of Islam.

So if Salah originally simply meant dua, we now use this term to convey the specific form of ritualistic Ibadah that Islam has ordained upon Muslims with all of its pillars and so on.

Similarly, with Ibadah, there is the linguistic definition of it, which highlights the core substance of its meaning (as already highlighted in post no. 3 of this series), and then there is the Shar'i definition of Ibadah. What is the Shar'i definition of Ibadah? Well it's basically whatever Islam states is Ibadah. Obviously, Islam has come and specified the scope of what constitutes acceptable Ibadah to Allah.

So let's say that someone prays Fajr prayer with 3 Rakahs, instead of 2 with the same fervor, humility, level of submission, and love to Allah as he does with his other acts of Ibadah. Is this considered an act of Ibadah in the linguistic sense? Absolutely! However, is it considered Ibadah in the Shar'i sense, in that it is what Islam has specified and ordained? Well, no. The Shar'i Ibadah of Fajr prayer is 2 Rakahs, not 3. This Ibadah is wrong and rejected in Islam, for it's an innovation. However, the act itself still remains Ibadah, even though it's unacceptable.

Similarly, if someone performs an act to an object and meets all the criteria stipulated in that linguistic definition of Ibadah, then we very much say that the person has performed Ibadah to that object. And since the linguistic definition of Ibadah does not stipulate that the person must attribute divine attributes to that object he is making Ibadah to, that means that it's false to say that one must believe that his object of Ibadah *\*must\** have divine attributes independent of Allah.

When it comes to the *Shar'i definition* of Ibadah (i.e. the correct understanding and application of Ibadah), is attributing divine attributes and independence to Allah necessary, in addition to the criteria laid out in the linguistic definition? Absolutely!

But once again, we must be careful not to conflate between the two (as highlighted in post no. 2 of this series)!

We may conclude what has been said as follows:

- If one meets the criteria laid out in the linguistic definition of Ibadah, then that person has committed Ibadah. Whether that Ibadah is correct (i.e. fulfills the *Shar'i definition*) or not is not the point here.
- Islam ordains that our Ibadah conforms to that which the Shariah has ordained and not to merely abide by the linguistic definition in an open-ended fashion.

## 6) Objections Raised Against the Linguistic Definition of Ibadah, Part 2

In this post, we will take a look at objection no. 2, which states:

“The terms “utmost” (غالية) and “ultimate” (نهائية) are vague in their scope and meaning. They are not very helpful in providing objective boundaries between what constitutes Ibadah acts and non-Ibadah acts. For example, when does sujud become Ibadah?”

Response:

Now there are some concerns specifically surrounding the terms “utmost” (غالية) and “ultimate” (نهائية). Some people feel that they are purely subjective and unhelpful in providing a clear boundary between acts that are Ibadah and non-Ibadah. However, this argument is based on faulty reasoning. As we have seen already, the definition of Ibadah that has been provided provides us already with at least three states of knowledge:

- 1) Certain knowledge of things that are definitely Ibadah: We alluded earlier to the first category of Ibadah, عبادة المحسنة or عبادة غير معقلة المعنى, which encompasses certain acts such as Hajj, Zakah, fasting in Ramadan, etc. and said that since revelation has clearly stated that these acts are inherently Ibadah, then there's no doubt regarding them.
- 2) Certain knowledge of things that are definitely *not* Ibadah: Looking at the definition of Ibadah, we know that whatever \*clearly\* doesn't contain those elements which constitute Ibadah is not Ibadah.
- 3) Uncertain knowledge of what constitutes Ibadah

Now just like with almost any principle or definition, one is bound to face some grey areas in application, which in turn then opens the door to Ijtihad amongst scholars to figure out what the strongest opinion is. This does not render the definition or principle to be insufficient or deficient. That would only be the case if we observed that the principle or definition in question was clearly unhelpful in most cases. However, if it's helpful in assessing the majority of cases

and there are only a few minor cases here and there which remain vague, then it's not fair to throw the definition and principle out the window on that basis. This is most especially when the bulk of scholars were comfortable using that definition and principle!

There are many beneficial principles in fiqh, hadeeth sciences, etc. and despite their clarity and benefit, scholars would still have many differences with each other when it came to their application. This is why there is such a thing as "Itjihad" and "scholarly differences". This subject of Ibadah, despite being more sensitive, is in fact no different. Scholars may very well differ with one another when it comes to identifying whether some acts constitute Ibadah. That in no way entails that the definition or principle they are attempting to apply is unhelpful or insufficient. What matters is that scholars reach an agreement on what the parameters are by which to determine what constitutes an act as Ibadah or not. That is, it's important that an agreement on the foundation of the matter is reached. When it then comes to its application, then the experts of theology may then weigh in and provide their opinion, just as a hadith expert and fiqh expert would do in their respective disciplines.

The bulk of classical scholars (religious and linguists) did indeed discuss the issue of differentiating between "servitude to creation" and Ibadah to Allah, and in their remarks they never claimed that the difference had to do with attributing divine attributes to their object of Ibadah. Rather, they continuously emphasized that it's the degree and level of "submission and humility" that is the differentiating factor. So when they discussed the difference between sujud Ibadah and non-Ibadah sujud, they were seeking to differentiate between when sujud constituted "honor and respect" and "utmost submission and humility", they DID NOT differentiate between "sujud to an object you believe is God" and "sujud to an object you don't believe is God". If that were the case, then they would have never investigated this question since the answer would have been right there in front of them.

So let's take a closer look at sujud as a case in point. The evidence in my personal opinion seems to line in favor of those scholars who argue that sujud comes under the 2nd category of Ibadah (i.e. *محتملة عبادة غير محضة*), which are those actions that are conditionally Ibadah and unless these actions fit under the criteria of Ibadah, they aren't acts of Ibadah. This is because they argued that sujud was permitted in previous Shariahs if they were done at a level of honoring and showing respect (which enters the sphere of good moral character and manners), as opposed to doing it in utmost submission and humility to the object in question (which enters the sphere of rituals and Ibadah).

There's no mathematical and statistical demarcation line between what constitutes a difference between "showing respect" and "falling into utmost submission and humiliation" anymore than there is one for differentiating between "generosity" and "reckless spending", etc. and other things which Islam commands us to avoid and do respectively. But that doesn't mean that we be like the Jews who when were ordered to sacrifice a cow and start asking a million questions such as:

"Well... what actually is meant by reckless spending? Give me a specific percentage. Do you mean if I spend 30% of my money on entertainment? 35%?"

And so on.

Rather, it's something someone should know based on a combination of factors via experience and indicators. The same applies when exercising judgment on what constitutes Ibadah or not and whether it meets the criteria laid out in its definition.

So in the case of sujud Ibadah, there are some "indicators" one could take into consideration.

For example, if the object you are making sujud to is someone or something that kuffar are known to make sujud to as well, then this could be an "indicator" of sujud Ibadah.

Or if the object you are making sujud to is something that by custom you wouldn't usually do so, like in the case of planets, stars, trees, etc. as opposed to people such as scholars for example.

Or if you are making sujud to someone or something with the intention of getting closer to that person so that you could gain favor and benefit from him, then this could possibly be another "indicator".

Or if you are making sujud with fervor, love, passion, longevity, etc. more so than what is required and expected for a mere show of respect and honor, then that could be another "indicator".

And so on and so forth.

All of the above could happen and be directed toward an object and person without believing that they are independent of Allah, *yet* the act could still be considered Ibadah according to the definition of Ibadah itself.

In conclusion:

- The bulk of linguists and religious scholars were historically comfortable using the terms "utmost" (غایة) and "ultimate" in their definitions of Ibadah.
- These same scholars discussed the difference between mere servitude and Ibadah and highlighted that the difference is to do with the degree of submission and humility. They DID NOT stipulate that the difference is in believing whether the object of Ibadah has divine attributes or not.
- The existence of grey areas is never a reason to introduce new stringent criteria simply for the sake of adding more clarity. Rather, one must provide evidence for introducing those criteria.
- The mere existence of grey areas never led scholars to discard definitions and principles. Rather, it led them to embrace the valid Itjihads that may take place as a result. The main thing is agreeing on these principles and not necessarily agreeing on every single application of them. The subject of Ibadah is no different.
- Using a fari'i secondary application matter such as sujud and working backward from there to determine the usuli foundation of Ibadah is unscholarly and unacademic. This is not how

scholars work. You don't say "Ibadah must be XYZ, otherwise the application of ABC won't work". Rather, you determine what XYZ is first, and then you debate how it's applied on ABC.

## 7) Determining the Manats (Reasons or Factors) of Shirk in a Given Scenario

It's important when examining a particular case of Shirk, that one be as detailed and careful as possible in analyzing the given scenario when attempting to extract the manats of Shirk. A person may be guilty of Shirk for a whole host of reasons, yet that doesn't entail that their actions of Shirk always constituted the simultaneous combination of all of these manats. At times, their actions which are labelled as Shirk may have only been due to the manat of one of these only. We don't want to fall into the misleading impression that certain manats MUST be present in order for a certain act to be considered Shirk.

To make this point clearer, we will illustrate this with an example...

"Khaled defies Allah because he believes that object X shares in the divine essence of Allah. He also proclaims that he loves object X equally as he loves Allah."

Khaled is guilty of shirk, is he not? Yes, he is. What are the manats for his Shirk? They are at least two:

- 1) Khaled commits Shirk in Ruboobiyah by believing that object X shares in the divine essence of Allah.
- 2) Khaled commits a violation of Tawhid of love (شرك المحبة) by claiming that he loves object X as much as he loves Allah.

So here we see two manats for the shirk of Khaled. Now, does that mean that Khaled would have only fallen into Shirk if these two manats existed together? The answer is no. Even if the first manat existed on its own, it would still constitute major shirk.

This is why it's critical that we be careful in identifying and separating all the manats from each other and truly understand what constituted of and contributed to the major Shirk of the given person in a given scenario. We cannot be simplistic in our assessment and must approach the matter in a systematic and detailed manner.

This is VERY important to bear in mind AT ALL TIMES when examining EVERY case. Please don't forget it.

## 8) Addressing the Argument: The Quraysh Believed that Allah Has Partners

Some brothers appeal to the below Ayahs which state:

وَيَوْمَ نَحْشِرُهُمْ جَمِيعاً ثُمَّ نَقُولُ لِلَّذِينَ أَشْرَكُوا أَيْنَ شَرَكُوكُمُ الَّذِينَ كُنْتُمْ تَزَّعَّمُونَ

One day shall We gather them all together: We shall say to those who ascribed partners (to Us): "Where are the partners whom ye (invented and) talked about?" [6:22]

أَلَا إِنَّ اللَّهَ مِنْ فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَمِنْ فِي الْأَرْضِ وَمَا يَتَبَعُ الذِّينَ يَدْعُونَ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ شُرَكَاءَ إِنْ يَتَبَعُونَ إِلَّا  
الظُّنُونُ وَإِنَّهُمْ إِلَّا يَخْرُصُونَ

Behold! verily to Allah belong all creatures, in the heavens and on earth. What do they follow who worship as His "partners" other than Allah? They follow nothing but fancy, and they do nothing but lie. [10:66]

They argue that it's clear that the Quraysh ascribed partners to Allah in His dominion; hence, this indicates that they believed that these partners had powers independent of Allah.

However, the Quraysh clarified that they believed that these partners were actually dependent upon Allah, for they used to say in their talbiyah:

لِبِيكُمْ، لِبِيكُمْ لَكُمْ إِلَّا شَرِيكٌ لَكُمْ، تَمْلَكُهُمْ وَمَا مَلَكُوا

"I respond to Your call, I respond to Your call, You Have no partner except the partner that You Have, You OWN HIM AND WHATEVER HE OWNS"

Ibn Ishaq commenting on this, said:

يُوحِّدُونَ فِيهِ بِالْتَّلِيَّةِ، ثُمَّ يَدْخُلُونَ مَعَهُ أَصْنَامَهُمْ وَيَجْعَلُونَ مَلْكَهَا بِيَدِهِ

"They declare that Allah is one (yuwahiddun feeh) in their talbiyah and then they bring alongside Him their idols and make their possession under His control"

So here the Quraysh make it clear that whatever partners they have associated with Allah are owned and dominated by (hence dependent upon) Allah.

So even if the Quraysh believed that their gods had control over parts of Allah's Kingdom, they still believed that they were ultimately under the control and will of Allah and were not controlling things independently of Him.

In a nutshell, this does not serve as explicit proof that the Quraysh believed that their false gods had powers independent of Allah.

## **9) Addressing the Argument: The Quraysh Believed that their Idols Could Compel Allah to Accept their Intercession**

Some appeal to the below passage:

مَنْ ذَا الَّذِي يَشْفَعُ عَنْهُ إِلَّا بِإِذْنِهِ

Who is it that can intercede with Him except by His permission? [2:255]

And others similar to it (20:109; 21:28 and 34:23) and argue that since the Quraysh took their idols as intercessors “without the permission” of Allah, that this somehow demonstrates that the Quraysh believed their idols had the power to independently act without conformance to Allah’s commands and Will. They argue that Allah would not have said “except by His permission,” unless the pagans believed that they did not require His permission.

This understanding sounds very strange from the start. The Quraysh wanted intercessors in order to get closer to Allah. So why force intercessors upon Allah that He does not desire in order to achieve that? The reason why people take intercessors is not due to their power, but rather due to their close relationship and station with God. If intercessors had powers independent of God, then one might as well ultimately direct their prayers and requests towards them instead of Allah!

This is not the correct way to understand such passages. The correct way to understand these passages is that Allah is denying their claim that Allah is pleased with these intercessors. Allah is absolving Himself from their claim that these intercessors will bring them closer to Himself.

The pagans are NOT saying:

“We believe our idols will compel Allah to have a closer relationship with us.”

No! That’s absurd! Rather, they are saying:

“We believe these idols will bring us closer to Allah due to their high station and rank.”

In response, Allah is pretty much saying to them:

“Who gave you permission to use such intercessors? Where did I ever say that I approve of these intercessors you have selected for yourselves?”

THAT is the correct way to understand these passages. In fact, it’s the only way that makes sense. Those who say otherwise clearly do not understand the concept of intercession, both linguistically and theologically.

We read in the following passage:

ويعبدون من دون الله ما لا يضرهم ولا ينفعهم ويقولون هؤلاء شفعاؤنا عند الله قل أنتبئون الله بما لا يعلم في السموات ولا في الأرض سبحانه وتعالى عما يشركون

And they worship other than Allah that which neither harms them nor benefits them, and they say, "These are our intercessors with Allah " Say, "Do you inform Allah of something He does not know in the heavens or on the earth?" Exalted is He and high above what they associate with Him [10:18]

So here we see that the condemnation is related to lack of permission by Allah, not ascription of independence to their intercessors. The phrase "Do you inform Allah of something He does not know in the heavens or on the earth?" entails that since the Omniscient Allah isn't aware

of such intercessors, that means that Allah gave no such permission for them to take these idols as intercessors, for it's impossible that something exists and Allah does not know it. One may refer to several of the major commentaries and see this interpretation provided.

Now, with all that said, is such an act a violation of Ruboobiyah? Absolutely, but of the second kind (refer back to the first section above). This is because such an action would entail that the worshiper thought less of either (or both) the Mercy and Knowledge of Allah by necessity. Depending on the kind of pagans and kind of intercession they sought, the areas in which violation of Ruboobiyah occurred may be different.

In summary, we don't see any clear-cut evidence presented here that the Quraysh believed that their idols had powers independent of Allah.

## **10) Addressing the Argument: The Quraysh Believed that their Idols Could Benefit and Harm**

There are several passages (e.g. 6:14; 10:18,107; 22:12, etc.) in the Qur'an that emphasize that the pagans must shun and abandon their false gods, for they do not and cannot cause them benefit or harm.

Some brothers try to infer from these passages that the pagans attributed powers of harm and benefit to their idols.

That's fine, but at the same time not really relevant. Rather, the question that must be asked was whether they believed that their idols could harm and benefit INDEPENDENTLY of Allah's Will.

When looking at such passages, we see no clear indication of this.

These passages are not highlighting that the pagans falsely ascribed the attribute of independence to their idols. Rather, these passages are intended to point out that the gods they are worshiping are not worthy of worship, for they do not have the necessary features of a true God.

This sort of method of argumentation from the Qur'an exists in several passages. An example of this is:

أَلَمْ أَرْجُلْ يَمْشُونْ بِهَا أَمْ لَهُمْ أَيْدِيْ يَبْطِشُونْ بِهَا أَمْ لَهُمْ أَذْنَانْ يَسْمَعُونْ بِهَا قَلْ  
ادْعُوا شُرَكَاءَكُمْ ثُمَّ كَيْدُونْ فَلَا تَتَظَرُونْ

Do they have any feet to walk with? Do they have any hands to grasp with? Do they have any eyes to see with? Do they have any ears to hear with? Say, 'Invoke your partners [that you ascribe to Allah] and try out your stratagems<sup>1</sup> against me without granting me any respite. [7:195]

The clear truth of the matter is that these passages cannot be used as explicit proof that the pagans believed that their gods were INDEPENDENT of Allah. One could only attempt to use

these passages as proof that they believed that their gods could benefit and harm, period. Whether they could benefit and harm dependently upon or independently of God is something we cannot derive out of these passages alone and must resort to other pieces of evidence in order to determine that.

In fact, the Quraysh made it clear that they believed that it's only by Allah's permission and Will that they are committing Shirk:

سِيَقُولُ الَّذِينَ أَشْرَكُوا لَوْ شَاءَ اللَّهُ مَا أَشْرَكَنَا وَلَا آبَاؤُنَا وَلَا حَرَمَنَا مِنْ شَيْءٍ

The polytheists will say, 'HAD ALLAH WISHED we would not have ascribed any partner [to Him], nor our fathers, nor would we have forbidden anything.'

[6:148]

وَقَالُوا لَوْ شَاءَ الرَّحْمَنُ مَا عَبَدَنَا هُمْ

They say, 'HAD THE ALL-BENEFICENT WISHED, we would not have worshiped them. [43:20]

What are the polytheists here saying? They are clearly saying that all their Shirk is happening by the explicit permission and Will (لو شاء) of Allah.

These Ayahs are an explicit proof that they believed that all their worship of their gods are happening with Allah's explicit approval.

So the Quraysh are NOT saying:

"We are knowingly going against Allah's wishes by worshiping these idols."

Or

"We know that Allah hates our idols, but our idols don't care because Allah has no authority over them."

Rather, what they ARE saying is...

"The very fact that Allah has not prevented us from continuing with our Shirk is evidence that He is pleased with it."

And this is a recognition of Allah's ultimate power and approval at the end of the day.

In short, we don't see any conclusive proof that such passages prove that Quraysh believed that their idols had powers independent of Allah. On the contrary, we have seen explicit proof that they believe that everything is happening in accordance with Allah's Will.

## 11) Addressing the Argument: The Qur'an Implicitly States that the Quraysh Believed their Gods Had Powers Independent of Allah

Some brothers appeal to the below passages:

قُلْ لَوْ كَانَ مَعَهُ آلهَةٌ كَمَا يَقُولُونَ إِذَا لَا يَتَعْنَوْا إِلَى ذِي الْعَرْشِ سَبِيلًا

Say, [O Muhammad], "If there had been with Him [other] gods, as they say, then they [each] would have sought to the Owner of the Throne a way." [17:42]

لَوْ كَانَ فِيهِمَا آلهَةٌ إِلَّا اللَّهُ لَفَسَدَتَا فَسَبَحَانَ اللَّهِ رَبِّ الْعَرْشِ عَمَّا يَصْفُونَ

Had there been within the heavens and earth gods besides Allah, they both would have been ruined. So exalted is Allah , Lord of the Throne, above what they describe. [21:22]

مَا اتَّخَذَ اللَّهُ مِنْ وَلَدٍ وَمَا كَانَ مَعَهُ مِنْ إِلَهٍ إِذَا لَذَّهَبَ كُلُّ إِلَهٍ بِمَا خَلَقَ وَلَعَلَّ بَعْضَهُمْ عَلَى بَعْضٍ سَبَحَانَ اللَّهِ عَمَّا يَصْفُونَ

Allah has not taken any son, nor has there ever been with Him any deity. [If there had been], then each deity would have taken what it created, and some of them would have sought to overcome others. Exalted is Allah above what they describe [concerning Him]. [23:91]

And then based on these passages, they argue that the pagans must have believed that their gods had independent powers of Allah, since if they didn't believe that, these passages would have been irrelevant in addressing them. So their line of reasoning is that the Qur'an MUST be refuting the stance of the pagans by pointing out the absence of the necessary implications of their beliefs. In other words, the pagans MUST have believed that their gods had independent powers in order for this argument to have had an impact on them.

Even though this is not a far-fetched way of reading these passages, it's far from necessary.

One could easily read these passages and understand from them that the approach of argumentation that the Qur'an is taking is that it's refuting their stance by pointing out the already faulty understanding of God that the pagans have by demonstrating that the necessary implications of their belief is absent.

Najm ud-Deen at-Tufi in his *al-Ishaarat al-Ilaahiyah ila al-Mabaahith al-Usooliyah*, said:

لَوْ كَانَ مَعَهُ إِلَهٌ غَيْرُهُ لَطَبَ ذَلِكَ الْغَيْرُ سَبِيلًا إِلَى مَغَالِبَةِ ذِي الْعَرْشِ عَلَى الْمَلَكِ وَانْفَرَادِهِ بِالْإِلَهِيَّةِ دُونَهُ ،  
وَاللَّازِمُ بَاطِلٌ ، فَالْمُزُرُومُ كَذَلِكَ

"If there were another god alongside Him, that other god would have sought to overtake the Throne and rule over the dominion completely. Since this necessary implication is clearly absent in reality and hence false (i.e. another

god overtaking the Throne), this entails that the notion that it's interlinked with is also false (i.e. the idea of another god alongside Allah)."

So the Qur'an on this reading is not merely saying:

"Oh, you believe in another god who is independent? Well, that can't be the case because..."

Rather, it's saying:

"Oh, you believe in another god? Well, your concept of god is wrong. Since a true god must have the following features...and since we don't see those features reflected in your god, your god must not be true."

So on this reading, it's not only refuting the stance of the pagans, but also pointing out that they have an incomplete and incorrect view of god. This is a more comprehensive refutation of their view, while on the first reading, it's not correcting their faulty understanding of god, but only refuting the veracity of its existence.

In any case, these passages DO NOT HAVE to be interpreted the way some are suggesting, nor is there any evidence which suggests that their interpretation is the stronger one. Seeing that this is the case, these passages cannot be independently used as explicit evidence for the view that the pagans viewed their gods as having powers independent of Allah.

Those using this argument must either provide evidence demonstrating that their interpretation is either the only possible one or at the very least the more plausible one.

## **12) Addressing the Argument: Prophet Isa ('alayhi assalam) and His Ability to Resurrect the Dead**

There appears to be a grave misunderstanding by some regarding the miracles of the Prophets. Let's take the example of Isa ('alayhi assalam) and the miracle of bringing the dead back to life or something non-existent into existence via creation ex-nihilo.

There is a correct way to understand this miracle and a false way.

The false way to understand this miracle is for one to come and say:

"Allah gave Prophet Isa the power and ability to bring the dead back to life whenever he desired to do so, as long as Allah oversaw and permitted this to happen."

Or

"The actual act of bringing the dead back to life happened due to actions that Prophet Isa performed by the permission of Allah."

This is not the way scholars have understood this matter.

Rather, if you refer to the writings of scholars and commentators such as Muhammad Al-Karaji al-Qassab (d. 360 A.H.), at-Tabari, Ibn Taymiyyah, Ibn Attiyah, Abu Hayyan, ar-Razi, Al-Baidhawi, Abu as-Saud, and pretty much every major commentator out there, you would find that they discuss the correct understanding.

The correct understanding that they mention is that the act of bringing the dead back to life cannot be attributed to Prophet Isa, and this is regardless of whether you say that Prophet Isa did it with the permission of Allah or not. Rather, the only thing that Prophet Isa did were actions that any human being could perform such as “blowing into the object or person” and “shaping and preparing the object to have life blown into it” and “make dua to Allah.” The only difference is that for Prophet Isa (rather than for any mediocre person), Allah would then at that given moment display His divine powers by bringing that dead person back or non-existent object to life. So Allah only happened to choose that moment when Prophet Isa performed those actions to then take action Himself.

So, we do not say that Prophet Isa is the one who actually raised the dead back to life, even if you say with the permission of Allah. Rather, the act itself is only performed by Allah, but done by using Prophet Isa as a cause to do so in order to fulfill a purpose (i.e. a proof for his prophethood, etc.)

So when Prophet Isa is reported in the Qur'an as saying:

أَنِّي أَخْلَقَ لَكُمْ مِّنِ الْطِينِ كَهْيَةَ الطَّيْرِ فَأَنْفَخْ فِيهِ فَيَكُونُ طِيرًا بِإِذْنِ اللَّهِ

That I design for you from clay [that which is] like the form of a bird, then I breathe into it and it becomes a bird by permission of Allah [3:49]

The scholars have understood “create” (translated in English as “design”) here to refer to fashioning and shaping the clay and “by the permission of Allah” to be a “full-scale permission” (إِذْنَ بِإِلْتَقَافِهِ) and not a mere “permission of allowing” (إِذْنَ بِعِلْمِهِ), which entails that it's Allah Himself who is bringing the dead back to life, and not Prophet Isa himself by the permission of Allah.

Some may say, “You're being too technical; it's the same thing!” Actually, it's not the same thing at all. If it were, then we wouldn't have found almost every single commentator mentioning this particular issue and raising it as a point worthy of clarification.

To bring the dead back to life or to bring something non-existent to existence is something which could ONLY be attributed to Allah Himself as an action. You cannot attribute it to someone else and then say, “Yeah, but he's doing it by Allah's permission.” No, this is false according to the majority of the mufassireen.

So as we could see, this is nothing compared to what some of the extreme Sufis believe about their saints for example. They believe that Allah gave them a general and unrestricted authority to do what they like in the universe and that they had the power of takween, that is if they say “Be”, then it is! Their saints ask for complete unrestricted control over the worlds (التصرّف المطلق الشامل العام الكامل في جميع العوالم). So the analogy is quite far off. These Sufis don’t merely believe that their saints wait for Allah to perform the action with them as a means, but rather that they have complete and unrestricted control over the worlds, just as they would have control over their own ability to blink their eyes, speak, smell, etc. So there’s no need for these saints to always make dua and seek permission from Allah to perform these supernatural deeds, for they already have been granted by Allah total unrestricted control over the universe.

In summary, the way some present the example of Prophet Isa and the miracles he performed is not in accordance with the understanding of the mufassireen.

### **13) The Christians and Jews were accused of Shirk in the Qur'an (9:31) for believing that their priests and rabbis had permission from God to legislate what is halal and forbidden on earth**

This refutes people who believe that Shirk could only occur if one ascribes independence to God.

Answering some potential questions in advance:

1) How do you know that the Qur'an is accusing them of Shirk for this?

Because it says that they took them as “Lords” and “Lord” (Rabb) is synonymous with “God” (Ilah) in certain contexts and this is one of them.

2) How do you know that Lord means God here?

Because if you read the historical context of this passage, it would become clear. The Prophet (peace be upon him) clarified that the Jews and Christians made Ibadah (yes, he used that word) to their rabbis and priests by taking what is halal and haram from them.

3) But how do you know that the Christians and Jews didn’t ascribe independence to their rabbis and priests when it came to their religious legislative powers?

For the simple reason that we know what they believe. Anyone could easily research the scriptural proof texts that Jews appeal to from their Old Testament and Christians (particularly Catholics and their papacy related beliefs) from their New Testament and see that their textual proof texts clearly indicate that they believed that the authority was given from God. So the fact of the matter is that we know what they believe. We have their writings, and it’s known. To say otherwise would be a misrepresentation of their beliefs.

4) But what's the difference between that scenario and Muslims who take fatwas of halal and haram from their scholars?

Huge difference. Muslims don't believe that their scholars have the right to legislate and determine what is halal and haram. We don't believe that our scholars are "inspired by" and have "authority from God" to legislate halal and haram laws. Rather, we believe that our scholars dive into the legislative sources and analyze them and then based on that, issue religious verdicts. In other words, we don't believe that our scholars are the sources of legislation, but rather are interpreters of it.

In conclusion, this is one out of a number of clear examples demonstrating that Shirk could occur without intending to believe that your object of worship has divine essence or is literally God, let alone has powers independent of God. It's enough that you treated that object of worship in a way that only God must be treated. Several other proofs are mentioned in Dr. Umayri's book.